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Prospects of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and Russia's Disinformation Campaign in the South Caucasus

Abstract

This paper aims to provide an empirical analysis of EU policy towards the South Caucasus in the framework of the CFSP and CSDP along with perspectives of further development, taking in to consideration Russia's military and ideological intervention in this region, and to address the issue of the EU's role in shaping Common European Security. Methodologically, the research is based on qualitative techniques of analysis, key assumptions are raised through a comprehensive review of existing studies/primary sources and, more specifically, presents a case study of August 2008's Georgia–Russia military confrontation and creeping occupation. The comprehensive review continues with Russia's disinformation campaign and series of anti-government protests in Georgia (after the so-called “Gavrilov's Night”), testing several theoretical explanations such as the democratic peace theory and the Europeanization Conflict concept concerning the EU's conflict resolution instruments' evaluation and offensive realism to explain Russia's involvement/intervention in South Caucasus territorial conflicts. As for its structure, the paper includes an introduction, with two important stages of model building – conceptualization and operationalization, an interpretation part – an overview of EU Foreign and Security Policy instruments, relationships with other global/regional actors, conflicts in the South Caucasus, specifically the, Georgia case, and, finally, a summarizing part, where key findings are highlighted.

Keywords: Post-Soviet Territorial Conflicts, Russia's Disinformation Campaign, European Union Common Foreign and Security Policy

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Introduction

More than 25 years after the collapse of Soviet Union, South Caucasus countries are facing a transitional dilemma, which, with a variety of social-economical and political challenges, is expressed in territorial conflicts, encouraged through Russia's intervention. In 1991, newly independent former Soviet Union countries were drawn in ethnic/territorial conflicts. Russia encouraged and supported South Ossetia and Abkhazia's separatist forces' military confrontation against the legitimate government of Georgia (as the country did consequently in 1991–1992, 1992–1993, and 2008) beyond the facade of the nation's self-determination. In August 2008, a five day war between Russia and Georgia questioned post-Cold War security order between the West and Russia. The 2008 war marked an important evolution in the series of conflicts that started in the Caucasus in tandem with the weakening and collapse of the Soviet Union. While in the late 1980s and early 1990s the conflicts were the result of mass mobilization around the banner of the nation (marking a revolutionary period of paradigm shifts) the 2008 war was much closer to classical wars between states and their centrally commanded armies. The attention of world leaders and the public was focused on Beijing on 8th August 2008, to witness the opening of the 29th Olympic Games, broadcast across the world as the new power of an old empire. The programmes were interrupted, and news flashes followed about a war erupting in the far away Caucasus. The Caucasus briefly captured global attention as a new conflict erupted in Georgia.¹

Existing studies show that while the EU has developed a coherent economic policy with South Caucasus countries especially in the transport sector, paradoxically, it has had no corresponding coherent conflict resolution policy for this region. The European Union eventually added mediation to its policy during the Russia–Georgia armed conflict in 2008, but Member States of the EU still found it hard to facilitate a political solution during the Geneva Process and a creeping occupation of Georgian territories by Russian military forces is still ongoing at the time of this writing.

Concerning the position of other European institutions, it should be mentioned that on June 25th, 2019 the parliament of the Council of Europe in a decision opposed by most former Soviet bloc countries voted to end Russia's suspension, which began with the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

Those voting to restore Russia's full rights in the council argued that if Russia left the organization – as it had threatened to do – it would

¹ V. Cheterian, *The August 2008 War in Georgia: From Ethnic Conflict to Border Wars*, "Central Asian Survey", no. 28(2)/2009, p. 155.

deny Russian citizens the right to bring cases before the European Court of Human Rights. Opponents argued that Europe was giving in to the illegal annexation of Crimea and Russia's support for separatist warfare in eastern Ukraine – and just as importantly, was starting a process of normalizing relations with Moscow. The head of Ukraine's delegation said the decision sent a “very bad message” to Moscow and others.²

According to several papers on this issue, incoherence in EU conflict resolution policy towards post-Soviet countries has been consequent upon two causal factors: the preferences of the EU Member States conditioned by their historical experience with Russia, along with the institutional framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

European Union conflict resolution instruments are categorised into two approaches: the Enlargement Policy, and the Neighbourhood Policy. For research purposes, EU conflict resolution instruments in the frame of the Common Foreign and Security Policy concerning neighbouring countries are reviewed.

This paper will strive for a balance between existing explanations and also aims to explore to what extent EU has impacted on the conflict resolution process of Georgia's secessionist conflicts and whether this can be related to the objectives, priorities, and time perspectives of the EU's conflict resolution policies, and, in the frame of the current research, Georgia's societal attitude transformation over the past 10 years will be revisited.

For research purposes, the theory of Offensive Realism will be applied to explain Russia's invasion in Georgia in August 2008. This theory focuses on the actions of great powers which seek regional hegemony in order to achieve security, and also focuses on disinformation targeting Georgia's neighbours or partners as an instrument for the Kremlin to achieve its strategic goals and promote extremist groups within Georgian society. Concerning EU policy – the democratic peace theory and the Europeanization Conflict concept will be revisited.

An Analysis of European Union Foreign and Security Policy Approaches

This part of the paper will be devoted to an analysis of conflict resolution instruments in the frame of the EU's Foreign and Security and Security and Defence (CFSP/CSDP) policies, explaining the “Europeanization

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/25/world/europe/council-of-europe-russia-crimea.html> (access 26.06.2019).

zation” concept in the framework of the democratic peace theory, and reviewing EU bilateral relations with other regional actors.

The EU’s foreign policy relations (FPRs) takes four main forms: enlargement (towards the core area of Europe), stabilization (in “the neighbourhood”), bilateralism (towards great and strong powers) and inter regionalism (towards regions and regional organizations). The four relationships are partly explained by the principle of distance which, in turn, leads to four types of counterparts: prospective members, neighbours, great powers, and more far-away regions.³

Considering the fact that in the Eastern neighbourhood, EU involvement in conflict resolution is seen as an obligation aimed at achieving border security, without enlargement interests, and contrary to the case when and if the EU may become involved in conflict, current research will pay attention to stabilization and bilateral forms of the EU’s foreign policy relations, outlining the EU’s role in conflict resolution in the South Caucasus considering Russia’s support for separatist forces.

Since the dissolution of the USSR, the South Caucasus countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, all with different internal and external social/political dynamics, have experienced the multi-vectoral approach of the EU’s influence on their politics, economies and societies; Georgia, with its Western and reformist orientation, Armenia, with its pro-Russian hybrid regime, and Azerbaijan, with its authoritarian aspirations.

The European Union, in concert with those South Caucasus countries, has developed a coherent economic policy, especially in the transport sector. Its first initiative was the TRACECA programme, involving the European Union and 14 Member States of the Eastern European, Caucasian and Central Asian region established in May 1993 and, upon the signing of a Multilateral Agreement, the objectives of TRACECA were underlined by the Baku Initiative and originated from the European Neighbourhood Policy launched in 2004. Between 1996 and 2016, INOGATE – the Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe mechanism was in operation. Those initiatives are considered to be a support to the political and economic independence of the former Soviet Union republics through the enhancing of their access to European and global markets.⁴

From 2003, in the framework of the EU Foreign and Security Policy, different civilian missions and military operations by EU rapid reaction forces were implemented, aimed at peacebuilding and peacekeeping in

³ B. Hettne, F. Soderbaum, *Civilian Power or Soft Imperialism? EU as a Global Actor and the Role of Inter – Regionalism*, “European Foreign Affairs Review”, no. 10(4)/2005, p. 535.

⁴ <http://www.traceca.org/en/traceca/> (access 20.04.2019).

conflict regions. In the framework of the CFSP, the EU practices soft power instruments – among them international agreement-fulfilment monitoring. This instrument is valuable for this research because from October 2008, Geneva International Discussions (GID) and its addressing of the consequences of the August 2008 Russia–Georgia war remains the only platform for all interested sides to discuss security-related issues and the humanitarian needs of the conflict-affected population.

The topic of European integration, also known as Europeanisation, boasts an extensive amount of literature pertaining to it. Two main theoretical strands can be distinguished in studies of Europeanisation: describing it as a process of accession to the EU and as the spread of European influence beyond the administrative borders of the EU. However, the majority of scholars perceive Europeanisation as a mixture of both. Furthermore, classical studies of Europeanisation distinguish two main strands of European integration: so called “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches. The “bottom-up” Europeanisation strand conceptualises the process in terms of Member States’ responses to European integration and observes the phenomena as originating at the national level. The “top-down” approach, in contrast, emphasises the importance of the EU’s impact on policy-making and institution building. Of these two approaches, European integration in the South Caucasus mainly assumes the “top-down” form.⁵

The idea behind the CFSP is to secure the gains of regional integration from external threats with the goal of having a single European voice on external affairs. It was introduced as one of three pillars of European integration in the Treaty on the European Union (the Maastricht Treaty) and then later given a greater institutional framework in the Amsterdam Treaty. The Lisbon Treaty, concluded by 27 Member States of the European Union on the 13th of December 2007 and which has been in effect since 2009, set a renewed and extended agenda for the European Foreign and Security Policy. This progress has occurred mostly in the fields of European diplomacy and civilian crisis management via stabilisation efforts. The Treaty of Lisbon created the office of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and an intergovernmental approach of the CFSP among the Member States.

The European Union has undertaken many overseas operations, using civilian and military instruments in several countries in three continents (Europe, Africa and Asia), as part of its Common Security and

⁵ H. Aliyev, *Assessing the European Union's Assistance to Civil Society in Its Eastern Neighbourhood: Lessons from the South Caucasus*, “Journal of Contemporary European Studies”, no. 24(1)/2016, pp. 44–45.

Defence Policy (CSDP). Each EU mission works within the framework of a comprehensive approach. A mission works in agreement and coordination with the EU Delegations in the same area and in the framework of EU regional policies. The decisions of deployment and management of a mission are taken by the EU countries during the Foreign Affairs Council. The European Union is implementing 6 military and 10 civilian missions.⁶

For the research purposes, the Europeanization Conflict Concept is when the EU creates a framework for conflict resolution, or participates in a process as its mediator.

The Democratic Peace Theory can be traced back to Kant, who suggested that in constitutional republics where political leaders are accountable to society, checks-and-balances restrain ambitions for war. Doyle has revived Kant's argument and underlined that liberal democracies never fought each other. Accordingly, Doyle has theorised that individual liberties, the rule of law, free elections, and democratic norms make democratic states develop mutual respect and peaceful relations with each other. The Democratic Peace Theory has received support from several studies. Maoz and Russett have examined the period between 1946–1986 and found that democracies are unlikely to fight each other. Their findings are supported by Oneal and Ray, who reached similar conclusions when controlling for economic interdependence.⁷

European diplomacy and foreign policy were severely tested in the Southern Caucasus by the Georgian summer war of 2008 with Russia over two secessionist border provinces. France took the initiative to mediate and acted more in the name of the EU than with its support, let alone with the participation of its partners. The Georgian conflict reactivated the Russian challenge to European security and cooperation as well as exposing the differences of political choices in crises between EU and NATO Member States.⁸

The EU was at the forefront of international efforts to stop the five-day war in August 2008. The then head of the EU Presidency, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, engaged in a series of diplomatic negotiations between the parties that resulted in the signature of a six-point

⁶ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/430/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations_en (access 20.04.2019); https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/eu-global-strategy_en?page=2 (access 20.04.2019).

⁷ M. Bayar, A. Kotelis, *Democratic Peace or Hegemonic Stability? The Imia/Kardak Case*, "Turkish Studies", no. 15(2)/2014, p. 243.

⁸ L. Ruhl, *European Foreign and Security Policy Since the Lisbon Treaty – from Common to Single?* Centre for European Integration Studies, Bonn 2014, p. 14.

Agreement, wherein points were added on the withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping forces, international monitoring, and consultation mechanisms. On October 1st 2008, the EU launched an unarmed civilian-monitoring mission to Georgia, namely the EUMM Georgia. The mission set out to monitor the actions of the conflicting parties and ensure their full compliance with the six-point Agreement, to contribute to stabilisation, normalisation, confidence building and to inform EU policy for a political solution to the conflict. The mission deploys around 200 monitors patrolling the buffer zones around the conflict-affected territories. The mandate covers the territory of Georgia's internationally recognised borders.

According to the official website of the European Union Monitoring Mission, "Our mandate is valid throughout all of Georgia. However, the de facto authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have so far denied us access to the territories under their control".⁹

The EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus was appointed as the first EUSR for the crisis in Georgia with a mandate to facilitate the overall implementation of the six-point Agreement. The previous position and mandate of the EUSR for the South Caucasus, established in 2003, was kept until September 2011 when the two mandates were merged into one. This new, broad mandate included contribution to a peaceful settlement of the conflicts in the South Caucasus, including Georgia's conflicts and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as to encourage regional cooperation.

It is firstly argued that the ENP, in terms of democratization, has failed. After a decade of EU democracy promotion toward the six post-Communist partner states, there are few signs of democratic progress in the neighbouring region. Since the ENP was launched, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine have seen very limited democratic progress, while the democratic record in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus has reversed under growing authoritarianism. Although it is possible that the democratic trajectory of these countries could have been even worse without the EU's partnership, it is argued that the EU has failed to achieve the democratic objective as set out in the ENP, and that the ENP on democratization has had limited impact, if any. Secondly, it is also argued that the EU's policy to promote security and integration through democratization has resulted in destabilisation in three partner states that has jeopardised European security. The military conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia and the political tension in Moldova of the 1990s and 2000 are a consequence of the EU's

⁹ https://eumm.eu/en/about_eumm/mandate (access 20.04.2019).

push for democracy in the region and Russia's reactions and striving for regional hegemonic influence.¹⁰

In order to evaluate EU Foreign Policy thoroughly, relations with Russia and the USA should be taken into consideration.

The EU and Russia recognise each other as key partners on the international scene and cooperate on a number of issues of mutual interest.¹¹

There are major differences between the EU and the USA as regards external relations. One is the EU's preference for long-term multidimensional, horizontal, institutional arrangements, whereas the USA prefers more temporary coalitions of the willing under its own leadership. A second difference can be related to contrasting ideas (idealism versus realism) in political philosophy. A third dimension of this European-American contrast in political culture is the US' religious approach to foreign policy, whereas the European approach is supposed to be rationalist and secular. The relations between the EU and Russia are rather similar to those between the EU and the USA in the sense that Russia also prefers bilateralism and takes a realist approach in foreign affairs. The EU has nevertheless a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Russia (signed in 1997) which covers human rights, economy, trade, security, and justice issues. The idea of a strategic partnership between the EU and Russia (where EU membership is a non-issue) implies substantive geopolitical room for manoeuvre for the latter.¹²

Territorial Conflicts in the South Caucasus, August 2008 Georgia–Russia War

The South Caucasus is the site of three armed conflicts with separatist backgrounds which have remained unsolved for years: the conflicts in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Azerbaijan's conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Both states are simultaneously in conflict with the separatists' informal patrons, respectively Russia and Armenia. The conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh broke out in the 1980s and 1990s in connection with the ongoing dissolution of the

¹⁰ M. Nilson, D. Silander, *Democracy and Security in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood? Assessing the ENP in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine*, "Democracy and Security", no. 12(1)/2016, p. 45.

¹¹ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/35939/european-union-and-russian-federation_en (access 27.06.2019).

¹² B. Hettne, F. Soderbaum, *Civilian Power or Soft Imperialism? EU as a Global Actor and the Role of Inter – Regionalism*, "European Foreign Affairs Review", no. 10(4)/2005, p. 535.

USSR. They stemmed from deeply-rooted ethnic conflicts (Georgian-Abkhazian, Georgian-Ossetian, and Azeri-Armenian) and the rise of nationalistic sentiment and independence aspirations in Georgia and Azerbaijan on the wave of perestroika. With the crucial assistance of Russia, (offered through Armenia in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh), separatists took control over the disputed areas in the course of armed operations and managed to defend their independence from Georgia and Azerbaijan. They created para-state organisms which were unrecognised by the international community in the areas they controlled, and which have become de facto protectorates of Russia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Armenia (Nagorno-Karabakh). The 'hot phase' of the conflicts ended in the mid-1990s, with ceasefires dictated by Russia and concluded under the auspices of the UN (Abkhazia) and the OSCE (South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh – the so-called OSCE Minsk Group). The next phase was negotiations, involving the patrons of peace and the parties to the conflicts, which continued for nearly a decade but failed to further the resolution of the conflicts.¹³

Over the years there was a gradual increase in European involvement in Georgia, which may be called forthcoming in terms of economic aid, politically friendly on the bilateral side, cooperative but cautious on contentious political issues and... mostly distanced [from] sensitive security issues. A good case in point was the European reluctance to take over the Border Monitoring Mission on the Caucasus range facing Russia, after Russia had vetoed the hitherto OSCE engagement in 2004.¹⁴

Since 2003, the EU has deployed an increasing number of instruments to promote conflict settlement in the South Caucasus. It appointed a special envoy to the region, tried to join the Russia-led conflict-settlement formats in South Ossetia as an observer, and financed the rehabilitation of the conflicts zones around Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Over the years, the EU spent over EUR 30 million before 2008 on post-conflict reconstruction around the conflict zones of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁵

However, the EU has been quite divided on its potential engagement in the South Caucasus. Some EU states feared that a greater EU role in the South Caucasus would complicate EU-Russia relations and wanted

¹³ W. Bartuzi, et al. *Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh: Unfrozen Conflicts Between Russia and the West*, "OSW Special Report" 2008, pp. 1–3.

¹⁴ https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf (access 20.04.2019).

¹⁵ <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analyticalarticles/item/11926-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2009-10-14-art-11926.html> (access 15.04.2019).

to avoid that at nearly any cost. Russia clearly opposed a greater EU role in conflict resolution. This internal and external opposition to greater EU involvement in conflict resolution in Georgia resulted in a number of policy failures by the EU. In late 2004, Russia vetoed the extension of the mandate of the 150-strong OSCE border monitoring mission in Georgia. Tbilisi invited the EU to take over the international monitoring of the Georgia-Russian border. Back in 2005, France (which later led the peace-keeping effort in 2008) led the 'Nyet' camp with the diplomatic support of Spain, Italy, Greece, and Germany to a degree against EU involvement in the messy Caucasian affairs. As a result, instead of the requested 150 monitors, the EU only sent 3 persons as part of a so-called EU Special Representative's Border Support Team. The team-member count was later increased to 12 persons. The EU's failure to deploy conflict-prevention mechanisms in Georgia and engage in conflict settlement was clearly the most significant. Throughout 2007–2008, the EU also tried to beef up the team with two police and two border liaison officers who were supposed to develop an institutionalised dialogue with Abkhazia and South Ossetia on police and border management related issues. Internal foot-dragging by some EU Member States, concerned that this would irritate Russia (especially Greece), and subsequently the August 2008 war, disrupted the process of extending the EU border support team.¹⁶

On 8th August 2008, Russian troops, for the first time since 1979, crossed national borders to attack a sovereign state, which resulted in the greatest crisis for European security in over a decade. The five-day war between Russia and Georgia caused the death of hundreds of soldiers and civilians, saw thousands wounded, caused the displacement of over 100,000 people, and witnessed the de facto loss of the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The August 2008 conflict in Georgia was the shortest of the six wars that have broken out in the Caucasus in the past 20 years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. With some 850 victims, it incurred fewer casualties than the other conflicts in the region. However, this war still seriously challenged relations between Russia and the West, and especially between Russia and the European Union. The principle of the inviolability of international borders, as established in the Helsinki Final Act, was disregarded. Also violated were the basic rules of international law, such as the respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, along with key principles from the Charter of the United Nations such as the non-use or threat of force.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ H. Tagliavini, *The August 2008 Conflict in Georgia*, "Proceedings of the Annual Meeting American Society of International Law", no. 105/2011, p. 89.

Before the August 2008 war, the Region of Tskhinvali was under the de facto control of separatists; this region was populated both by Georgians and Ossetians. Villages were mixed in a chessboard order that actually favoured the Georgian side, and were under the official control of the Georgian government in Tbilisi. Tensions rose gradually beginning in late July 2008, when all sides of the conflict (including the press) were spreading the word that the situation within the conflict territories was worsening. On July 28th of the same year, separatist fighters opened fire on OSCE observers and peacekeepers, as those fighters were moving in the direction of the village of Chorbauli; on July 29th, prior to the official outbreak of hostilities, the separatist militants initiated the shelling of villages inhabited by mixed ethnic populations.¹⁸

The bombardment rounds used were illegal under international law, because of their large calibre. That same day, the OSCE observers working together with peacekeepers were fired upon again. Similar incidents, reported by the OSCE mission in Georgia, took place until August 6th, including continuous minor armed clashes, the shelling of villages, artillery bombardments, and numerous responses to “hostile fire” reported by both sides. On August 4th-5th, Tskhinvali was visited by journalists and diplomats, and on August 7th by Temur Yakobashvili, the Georgian Minister of Reintegration, along with Yuri Popov, chief Russian negotiator over South Ossetia. While the Georgian minister’s attempt to start a negotiation process failed because of the Ossetian refusal to participate, Mr. Popov was more successful. He managed to contact the de facto ruler of the region, Eduard Kokoiti, but failed to convince him to attend a meeting. In a short time, General Marat Kulakhmetov, Commander of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces in the Tskhinvali region, admitted that his peacekeepers could not stop Ossetian combatants from shelling the villages, and advised the Georgian side to declare a unilateral cease fire, which was announced by Mr. Saakashvili at 7:10pm. The peace did not last long. According to official reports from Tbilisi, troops of the Russian Federation had already entered the region at that time through the Roki Tunnel. The tunnel is approximately 3600 meters long, and is one of very few routes connecting Georgia and the Russian Federation. Bombardment of the Georgian villages resumed from 8:30pm, and at around 11:35pm, the President of Georgia transmitted three orders to the Commander of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: to halt the invasion of the Georgian territory by the regular army of the Russian Federation; to suppress enemy fire directed against the Georgian villages through the elimination of the weapon emplacements of the

¹⁸ http://www.parliament.ge/files/1329_22127_506571_Conclusion_E.pdf (access 20.04.2019).

adversary in the Tskhinvali region and, finally, to ensure the security of the peaceful civilian population of the Tskhinvali region. On the other side, the Russian President gave similar orders to his military command. The Russian operation, dubbed “Compulsion to Peace,” implied the use of all means necessary to protect the South Ossetian population from Georgian “aggression” and prevent such attacks in the future. As a result, Georgian armed forces were forced out of the region, and more than half of the country was occupied by Russian troops.

On August 15th, with the active mediation of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Presidents Saakashvili and Medvedev signed a ceasefire agreement, containing the following six points: (1) Adopt the regime of the non-use of force, (2) Halt all military activities, (3) Ensure free access to humanitarian aid in the region, (4) Return Georgian troops to their regular dispositions, (5) Return Russian troops to the lines held prior to the ongoing military activity while empowering Russian peacekeepers with the provision of additional security measures until an international solution is attained, and (6) Start international discussions on the preservation of security and stability in both the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions.¹⁹

The occupied territories give Russia major political leverage over Georgia. Russian bases in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia pose serious problem in terms of the population’s security. One base is a mere 20 km away from Tbilisi, in the Akhlagori region. The military units from this base provide major support to the illegal separatist authorities in the regions. Provocations continue periodically, such as the so-called ‘borderisation’, abductions of local people by the Russian troops, etc.²⁰

The collapse of the Soviet Union triggered the rise of a new political paradigm in the South Caucasus. In turn, ethnic conflicts and the emergence of de facto states determined the foreign policies and strategic objectives of regional actors and global powers as they dealt with the post-Soviet space.²¹

In this context, Russia has continuously sought to position itself as the sole successor to the Soviet Union’s geopolitical heritage. This as-

¹⁹ G. Pochkhua, *A Game Theory Application of the Rational Actor Model to the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008*, “Connections”, no. 10(1)/2010, pp. 89–90.

²⁰ http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf (access 15.04.2019).

²¹ E.A. Souleimanov, E. Abrahamyan, H. Aliyev, *Unrecognised states as a means of coercive diplomacy? Assessing the role of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Russia’s foreign policy in the South Caucasus*, “Southeast European and Black Sea Studies”, no. 18(1)/2017, p. 77.

sumption actually predetermined Moscow's political assertiveness and its consistently defiant posture in its efforts to radically reverse the post-cold-war order. The fundamental shift in Russia's foreign policy, which started gradually in the mid-2000s, became more evident during the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and was fully unveiled by the seizure of Crimea in 2014. However, the phenomenon termed in the scholarly literature as "Russian revisionism", has been more variable and more nuanced than this commonplace conclusion suggests. Since Russia remains opposed to a formal revision of borders outside of the Post-Soviet space, Russian revisionism has to be understood as being targeted and selective in its nature.²²

The theory of offensive realism adequately explains Russia's policy towards the South Caucasus. According to this theory, security in the international system is scarce, driven by the anarchical nature of the international system, and such theorists contend that states seek to maximize their security through maximizing their relative power by expansionist foreign policies, taking advantage of opportunities to gain more power, and weakening potential challengers. The state's ultimate goal is hegemony or primacy. How a state will go about such expansion will vary from nation to nation (due to geography, military tradition, etc.). Offensive realism does not predict the same security strategy for every state.²³

Civil Position and 2019's Anti-government Protest in Georgia – "Gavrilov's Night"

In June of 2019, member of the Russian Communist Party and legislative body Duma Sergey Gavrilov visited Georgia within the Inter-parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy and occupied the chair of the speaker of Parliament of Georgia reserved by protocol for the Head of Parliament. He delivered a speech in Russian extolling the Orthodox brotherhood of Georgia and Russia. Earlier that week, Gavrilov had voted in favour of the independence of Abkhazia, an act that angered the Ukrainian ambassador to Georgia. Following Gavrilov's actions, the Georgian opposition blocked the speaker and called for protests that demanded the government's resignation. As night fell, Georgian law enforcement used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse protesters. Approximately 240 demonstrators were injured while clashing with police and 305 protesters were arrested. At least two people sustained eye injuries and experienced loss of

²² Ibidem.

²³ S.E. Lobell, *War is Politics: Offensive Realism, Domestic Politics, and Security Strategies*, "Security Studies", no. 12(2)/2002, pp. 165–166.

vision due to rubber bullets. The government accused the protesters of attempting to storm the parliament building. Following the protests of June 20th–21st 2019, Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgia's Chairman of Parliament, announced his resignation. After mass demonstrations on June 24th in Tbilisi, the head of the ruling Georgian Dream Party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, announced a change to the electoral system from a mixed to proportional representation for the 2020 elections and a lowering of the vote barrier for parties, and President Salome Zurbishvili shortened her visit to Belarus following the beginning of the protests. In an interview with Euronews, Zurbishvili called for a "de-escalation" in the situation while also blaming Russia for stirring up a "fifth column" in a country that is loyal to Moscow. In July 2019, Russia denounced an expletive-laden attack on Vladimir Putin by Georgian TV host Giorgi Gabunia during a broadcast on Rustavi 2, although Minister of Internal Affairs Giorgi Gakharia, who said he took political responsibility for the June 20th developments as minister, but would remain in his position until an investigation clarified who was liable for what transpired.²⁴

As for the conclusion, Gavrilov's statement sparked massive protests that led to police action, apologies from the government, resignations of political leaders and the adoption of electoral reforms ahead of the 2020 elections. At the same time, Nika Melia MP, from the opposing political party United National Movement was released on bail, as he had been charged with organising, managing or participating in group violence during the protests.

After June 2019's civil protest, Russian president Vladimir Putin signed a decree suspending passenger flights carrying Russian citizens from Russia to Georgia, effective as of July 8th, and Russia's Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-being increased quality controls on Georgian wine and mineral water, seen as being directly linked to the escalation in tensions.

The then acting government of Georgia attempted to link the country's existing economic problems to the civil protest and convince its citizens that anti-occupation rallies diminished the number of Russian tourists, which subsequently inflicted the country's economic system, thereby subsidising flights from Russia to Georgia while at the same time oppressed independent media outlet Rustavi 2, which had obtained materials on the excessive use of force by police officers during the civil protest.²⁵

²⁴ <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/1734> (access 27.06.2019).

²⁵ Georgia has a broad and diversified media landscape and the most liberal media laws in the entire Southern Caucasus region. There is virtually no direct state censorship, although in some cases, private media reflect the political orientation of

Following the 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia, a new political force came to power that actually started to “reset” relations between the Kremlin and Tbilisi. This new political entity brought a partial restoration of economic relations and trade between the two countries. According to data from 2017, Russia is Georgia’s largest export destination, with 14.1% (274 million USD) of Georgian products exported to the country compared to 2016 when Russia came in third (132 million USD) after Turkey and China. Despite an increase in export to Russia, the largest share (24%) of Georgian export goes to EU countries. Russia comes in second as the largest importer of Georgian goods, following Turkey (532 million USD). Most imports come from the EU (28%).²⁶

Those members of the Georgian population aged 50 and older have spent a significant part of their lives in the Soviet era; they speak Russian, have person-to-person contact within Russian society and many feel nostalgic about the Soviet past. Another group vulnerable to pro-Kremlin propaganda in Georgia is made up of ethnic minorities (namely the Armenians and Azerbaijanis). A lack of knowledge of the Georgian language among the Armenian and Azerbaijani populations, living in the southern and south-eastern parts of the country, is a serious barrier to their integration into Georgian society. As a result, it is difficult to keep this population informed through Georgian sources and leaves space for foreign disinformation sources including, of course, those Kremlin-governed. It should be noted that after the 2008 war, Georgian cable TV companies stopped transmitting Russian channels upon a verbal directive from the government. All Russian channels were also removed from cable TV packages. However, after the change of government in 2012, the broadcasting of Russian channels resumed. For these reasons, ethnic minorities as well as the Russian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Kurdish populations prefer watching programmes where the language is familiar and the content more interesting which naturally works against Georgia’s efforts to counter disinformation. The large Georgian diaspora and their economic (among other) links with their families in Georgia provide the Kremlin with a favourable means of provocation in terms of disinformation and

media company owners, on whom they depend both financially and politically. Over the past few years, some news websites have been actively involved in anti-Western propaganda and their rhetoric is often expressed in a xenophobic and homophobic context.

²⁶ <http://www.economy.ge/?page=ecoreview&s=20&lang=en> (access 27.06.2019); <http://www.economy.ge/?page=ecoreview&s=20&lang=en> (access 27.06.2019); http://mof.ge/images/File/outlook/Georgia-The-Outlook_GEO_Oct-2017 (access 27.06.2019).

as a means of exerting other kinds of influence. We may also consider the conservative portion of active believers belonging to the Georgian Orthodox Church as being vulnerable to Kremlin disinformation.²⁷

The ambiguous policy of the Georgian authorities towards Russia, the post-Soviet past of some of Georgia's citizens, the ethnic minorities in the southern part of Georgia, and a common religion with Russia all represent a serious threat to Georgia's political orientation. At this stage of development, it is most important to strengthen the EU's political instruments in Georgia, as well to ensure EU border security and avoid Russia's hegemony in the South Caucasus region.²⁸

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to provide an empirical analysis of EU policy towards the South Caucasus in the framework of the CFSP and CSDP and, especially, to provide a case study of August 2008's Georgia-Russia military confrontation, testing several assumptions, and also to revisit Russian propaganda role in public attitudes formation in post-Soviet societies. A summarizing task will reconnect the theoretical conclusions and generalise findings.

Several authors admit that the EU's Kantian view of security through democracy has failed, and its ambition to create a ring of Eastern friends has not led to improved relations in the Eastern neighbourhood. Indeed, it is rather to the contrary; the EU's push eastward has instead intensified insecurity in its partner states due to limited democratization.²⁹

The breakout of the war demonstrated the inadequacy of EU conflict prevention and management policies in the region. Despite significant funding disbursed to mitigate the consequences of the conflicts, EU assistance was not able to install better, more effective political and security strategies for conflict prevention.³⁰

Additionally, a number of authors admit that the EU's efforts have significantly contributed to the objective of conflict prevention, but the profile of the EU in the field of international conflict management weakened its position in the area of conflict transformation, where the lack

²⁷ http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf (access 27.06.2019).

²⁸ Authors Observation.

²⁹ M. Nilson, D. Silander, *Democracy and Security in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood? Assessing the ENP in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine*, "Democracy and Security", no. 12(1)/2016, p. 44.

³⁰ <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analyticalarticles/item/11926-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2009-10-14-art-11926.html> (access 15.04.2019).

of progress in turn limited the EU's impact in the areas of international conflict management and conflict settlement. The main conclusion put forward is that in order to have a true impact, the EU needs to undertake a differentiated, balanced and patient approach to conflict resolution.³¹

The mentality of the Soviet Union system cultivated in the Cold War period offers good grounds to stir up anti-Western sentiment and to strengthen loyal attitudes towards Russia as the legal successor of the USSR and an opponent of the West.³²

Although Russia's interests in the South Caucasus have been certainly economic, significant security interests have also been at stake. The indigenous population in the North Caucasus is closely linked, both culturally and ethnically, to some ethnic groups in the South Caucasus. The 1991–1992 South Ossetian conflict had, for example, dramatic repercussions in the republic of North Ossetia within the Russian Federation; hundreds of North Ossetian volunteers fought against Georgian troops and donations were collected for the 'South Ossetian brethren'. In addition, the Abkhazian conflict during 1992–1993 generated tension in the ethnically related North Caucasian republic of Adyghe. Furthermore, the South Caucasus occupies a strategically important position as a land bridge linking Russia with Turkey and the countries of the Middle East. Therefore, Russia's security has been tied to the South Caucasus.³³

In order to retain the South Caucasus in its orbit, Moscow considered it both affordable and reasonable to utilise the existing states in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh as instruments in order to regulate and limit the dynamic of integration by Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan into Western institutions. To that end, Russia elaborated and imposed a range of instruments and mechanisms which facilitated the use of the unrecognised states as means of coercive diplomacy vis-a-vis Tbilisi, Baku and Yerevan. As a consequence, Russia's geopolitical ambitions to some extent continue to determine the destiny of the de facto states.³⁴

³¹ E. Jeppsson, *A Differentiated, Balanced and Patient Approach? The EU's Involvement with Georgia's Secessionist Conflicts beyond the August 2008 War*, "EU Diplomacy Paper", no. 06/2015, p. 7.

³² http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf (access 15.04.2019).

³³ E. Karagiannis, *The 2008 Russian-Georgian War Via the Lens of Offensive Realism*, "European Security", no. 22(1)/2013, p. 83.

³⁴ E.A. Souleimanov, E. Abrahamyan, H. Aliyev, *Unrecognized states as a means of coercive diplomacy? Assessing the role of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus*, "Southeast European and Black Sea Studies", no. 18(1)/2017, p. 78.

It may be assumed that Russian military intervention in South Ossetia was a predictable reaction to possible NATO expansion into Georgia, considering a Bucharest April 2008 Summit, wherein Georgia and Ukraine had hoped to join the NATO Membership Action Plan, but NATO members only decided to review their request in December 2008.

As for the conclusion, the EU paid twice. After avoiding the deployment of 150 monitors in Georgia in 2005 in order not to irritate Russia, the EU ended up deploying close to 300 monitors in 2008 and paying close to EUR 1 billion to the international fund for a post-conflict rehabilitation of Georgia. The war of 2008 culminated in being one of the worst crises in EU-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War.

In the empirical part of the paper, it has become clear that, despite long-term ENP democracy promotion, there has been very limited democratic development in the partner states and security challenges remain unsolved. As far as the conducting of civilian missions in countries where the EU does not have any enlargement interests (and where conflict resolution instruments are not backed by political strategy) is concerned, this approach may lead to conflict resolution if conflict were to occur through economic problems. However, when conflict is political in its nature, intervention without political instruments does not lead to conflict resolution. The absence of any political strategy tied with the Kremlin's disinformation campaign affect the European aspirations of Georgian society.

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